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The Ideological Underpinning of Changes Made to Level Two Vocational and Academic Physical Education Qualifications in England

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to seek to examine recent changes made to level two qualifications in physical education within English education, understanding the ideological and philosophical underpinning, and the potential implications for teaching and learning. This article seeks to place these amendments into the context of wider educational reform seen under the successive Conservative-led governments (2010-2018). Furthermore, by comparing and contrasting the amendments made to an academic and vocational qualification, this article seeks to explore the perceived lack of parity of esteem between these two styles of qualification.

It is proposed that the adjustments made to both the General Certificate in Secondary Education in Physical Education (PE) and Business and Technology Education Council qualification in Physical Education surmount to the 'academization' of PE as a subject and level two qualification. It is interpreted that the 'academization' of these qualifications can be understood through both the lenses of political ideology, and educational philosophy. Furthermore, the implications of the adjustments made to these qualifications have pedagogical implications that will influence both the teaching of PE as an examinable subject and the learning that takes place.

Introduction

Since the formation of the General Certification for Secondary Education (GCSE) and the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) in the mid-1980s, the British government has continuously attempted to reform the 14-19 curriculums [1, 2]. In 2016, the Physical Education (PE) GCSE course was reformed through the introduction of several changes, that included more demanding theoretical content, changes to the assessment weighting and the removal of certain sports [3, 4]. Alongside these changes, the BTEC qualifications are also being reformed to include: external key stage (KS) 4 and 5 assessments; reduced weighting against the GCSE and the introduction of contextualized Maths and English [5-8]. Together with these changes, a new 9-1 grading system and the 'Progress 8' performance measure are also being introduced [9, 10]. The focus of this essay will explore the context and rationale surrounding two changes within both GCSE and BTEC qualifications, specifically relating to the assessment weighting; theoretical content; introduction of the exam and the greater Maths and English focus. All of these reforms will be critically analysed regarding their impact on teaching delivery and student learning.

Academic 'GCSE' PE

Fundamentally, education is a strong reflection of the philosophical view of the curriculum designers [11]. Under the current Conservative government, education is predominantly driven by neoliberalism; therefore, learning is associated to performativity and social progression [12-15]. Usually a neoliberal curriculum serves the Classical Humanist perspective; education is used to sufficiently prepare individuals to meet the demands of society whilst inflicting a hierarchy [16-18]. Subsequently, individuals

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who have 'higher education credentials' are provided 'higher paid jobs', whereas the individuals who have 'lower education credentials' are placed into 'lower paid jobs' [19]. The Former Secretary of Education, Michael Gove, stated that "[the] changes to GCSE qualifications [are] designed to address the grade inflation, dumbing down and the loss of rigour" [10].

Since the introduction of GCSE PE, it has been associated to substantial criticism regarding the traditional practical nature of the subject [1, 20]. In an attempt to change these perceptions and to "increase academic rigour," two key reforms are taking place [21]. To "enable better progression to further study," the GCSE course is integrating more demanding theoretical content [21, 22]. Subsequently, the gap between KS4 and 5 could potentially be narrowed, due to the new GCSE sufficiently preparing the students [21]. Alongside more demanding content, the theory to practical assessment weighting is being switched from 40%-60% to 60%-40% respectively [23].

By increasing the 'academic value' of GCSE PE a process known as 'academicization' is occurring [24, 25]. 'Academicization' is a dated and enduring feature of the 14-19 PE curriculum and has enabled a greater 'academic status' to be generated, whilst eliminating traditional stereotypes [20, 26]. Nevertheless, [27] argue that 'academicization' is simply a theory, which adopts 'capitalist' ideals to drive forward the economy. Furthermore, 'academicization' is not a theoretical myth, but is supported by evidence [27]. However, it could be argued that GCSE PE is becoming too academic and could potentially exclude individuals.

Impact on Teaching and Learning

With the increased theory, the teachers' pedagogy could be impacted and practice may focus upon preparing the students for the exams [28]. However, compared to practical performance, theoretical knowledge is easier to assess, due to the process being objective and guided by resources. A disadvantage to the increased theoretical content could lead to practical elements diminishing, alongside the greater emphasis and implementation upon 'traditional' teaching methods [26]. [29] Highlight that with practical and active learning diminishing within theoretical lessons, kinaesthetic learners may not be sufficiently accommodated for. In contrast, the learning of both visual and auditory learners may be maximized through greater time spent in the classroom [30]. Nevertheless, for theoretical lessons to be engaging for all learning styles,

teachers must utilize a range of teaching strategies [31].

Furthermore [1] suggest that teachers need to deliver GCSE PE efficiently to ensure all content is quickly covered, whilst promoting personalized learning. Subsequently, students may only experience 'shallow learning' [32]. Argues that 'shallow learning' does not establish efficient memory formation; for sufficient neural pathways to be developed 'deep learning' must occur [33]. However, argue that in some cases 'shallow learning' is efficient enough when simply recalling information [34]. Due to the new GCSE specification being designed through a 'prescriptive curriculum,' teachers with limited theoretical understanding could still be sufficiently supported [22, 35].

Nevertheless, with the increased theoretical weighting and greater depth required for the academic specifications, teaching delivery may return back to traditional 'talk and chalk' approaches [22]. Suggest that 'chalk and talk' methods lead to reduced student-centered learning with greater emphasis upon direct learning [36]. To enable a successful transition, especially with the more demanding theory, teachers should apply 'scaffolding' into their lessons to help construct new knowledge [37]. 'Scaffolding' can be implemented through various strategies to help build higher-ordered thinking skills and to introduce different exam techniques [38]. However, the implementation of 'scaffolding' can be difficult; consideration needs to be taken regarding when and how support is adjusted and removed [39, 40]. Nonetheless, 'scaffolding' is an essential pedagogical strategy when students are introduced to new and complicated topics [2].

Vocational 'BTEC' PE

Vocational education is associated to programmes which impart valuable lifelong skills necessary for employment [40, 41]. Despite the popularity of vocational qualifications, the majority of young people within this sector are often 'overlooked' [19]. Currently, the common features of vocational courses are associated towards applied learning and reduced examinations [42, 43]. Ultimately, under the BTEC reforms, all KS4 and 5 BTEC courses in sport will require an external exam [7, 8]. Alongside external exams, the new BTECs will have English and Maths integrated into them [5]. Nevertheless, this may not be a bad thing as Maths and English are perceived to be extremely valuable skills for today's society [44-47].

Again these reforms are governed by ‘academicization,’ as Michael Gove stated “We need to ensure [that] vocational education is integrated with academic learning...and more valuable in the new labour market” [48]. Despite the curriculum displaying elements of the Classical Humanist perspective, the 14-19 education also favours the Instrumentalism perspective [16]. Therefore, it is believed that through education, individuals can achieve and contribute towards society’s economic goals [49]. With the integration of Maths and English into BTECs, the government is ensuring that all individuals are sufficiently prepared to meet the needs of the economy [50]. Nonetheless, Instrumentalism and Classical Humanism are simply theories, which are products of political and social agendas [2].

Compared to academic routes, vocational qualifications are considered to be inferior within society [19]. A theory which explores equality between vocational and academic programmes is ‘parity of esteem’. Through accomplishing ‘parity of esteem,’ it could enable greater standardisation and comparisons between both 14-19 routes [16, 51], however, not all individuals gain success from exams and require different assessment methods [19]. Therefore, a curriculum should not be tailored towards a ‘one-size-fits-all-approach,’ but should be governed by opportunities for individuals to demonstrate their own aptitudes [52]. Nevertheless, ‘parity of esteem’ is an unrealistic myth and unless groups within society change their opinions, there will inevitably be a divide [2, 53]. However, [54, 55] state that by encouraging ‘academic drift’ within vocational courses, through ‘academicization’, ‘parity of esteem’ could potentially be achieved. Despite the push for ‘parity of esteem,’ differences in vocational and academic courses should be clearly distinguished [45].

Impact on Teaching and Learning

With the introduction of the exam, it may lead teachers to resort to traditional methods of ‘Talk and Chalk,’ therefore, theory lessons could predominantly be delivered through using the command teaching styles [35]. Through implementing these direct teaching styles, memory formation and recall could potentially be enhanced [56]. However, [46] argues that to guide student learning within a positive learning environment, lessons should be focused upon student-centered strategies. [57, 58] highlight that through the introduction of an exam, student learning may become focused upon performance outcome as opposed to a process.

Nevertheless, for knowledge to be quantified in an efficient way, exams need to be implemented as relying upon internal verification could lead to discrepancies within marking [2, 59]. With the introduction of external exams into the BTEC, [60] argues that the 14-19 curriculum is becoming an ‘exam factory,’ therefore, greater pressure could be placed onto teachers. Nonetheless, to determine a school’s reputation and to limit Ofsted inspections, performance measures are extremely important [61, Parliament 2016]. Despite the introduction of ‘Progress 8’ measuring school performance upon students’ attainment and progress [9], considerable pressure would still be exerted onto teachers to get ‘good’ grades (Parliament 2016). With the extra pressure associated to delivering the BTEC qualification, departments may opt out of delivering the qualification.

[62, 63] suggest that exam-orientated assessment can have an adverse impact upon students’ educational engagement and well-being. Using the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), when students are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated they actively seek to learn through autonomous motivation [64, 65]. Whilst autonomous motivation is generated, students have the desire to self-regulate their own learning without external rewards [66-68]. However, [69] argue that autonomous motivation has many benefits but can only be developed through promoting positive learning environments.

Nevertheless, when individuals have a perceived lack of self-competence to achieve a desired outcome, a motivation is established [64]. Therefore, due to the introduction of the exam and a focus upon Maths and English, some students may perceive the exam to be too difficult and unachievable; resulting in the development of a motivation [70]. When a motivation is generated, students tend to lose attention and begin to become disruptive [71, 72] suggest that disruptive behavior leads to the learning environment to be negatively impacted for all. Subsequently, to resolve the disruptive behavior, the teacher must develop sufficient strategies to ensure autonomous motivation is established [71, 41, 73]. Furthermore, no matter what the design of the curriculum, the fundamental role of a teacher is to facilitate effective learning environments [41].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the governments’ neoliberal philosophy is clearly identified throughout the 14-19 education with the push to prepare individuals

sufficiently for society and the economy. Nevertheless, the curriculum is heavily placed between the debate of Classical Humanism and Instrumentalism. Both the academic and vocational reforms are guided by the theory of academicization; therefore, the government is putting in place changes to increase the 'academic value' of both 14-19 programmes. Despite the process of academicization attempting to increase the 'academic value' of vocational programmes, parity of esteem is an unrealistic concept if societal values are not altered. With the increase in theoretical content, weighting and examinations, teaching delivery may resort back to traditional classroom methods. However, to maximize student learning, students need to remain engaged and motivated within personalized learning environments.

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